

# "Jonah: Not Just a Whale of a Story"

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Selections from Jonah

The book of Jonah is found in the Prophets section of Old Testament. That alone should get our attention, for it suggests to us that this is more than just a cute children's story. The Prophets were God's megaphones. When God had a message to deliver to the ancient Israelites, God used the prophets to communicate that message. Most of the books in the prophets section contain the sermon notes of the prophets - oracles, poetry, sermons delivered to the people. Jonah is unique in that it's a story. It's written in narrative form. And yet it has a very important, prophetic message. That message is not well known because we usually don't consider the whole story. (It takes 4 chapters to tell the whole story) It's truly one of the most important books in the OT. Let's take a look.

## **Jonah 1:1-17**

*Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.*

*But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get*

*up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish." The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so. Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

Before we continue with the story of Jonah, let me deal with one issue that comes up whenever Christians study this book. And it's this: Is it historical or a parable?

William Jennings Bryan once said this: "If the Bible had said that Jonah swallowed the whale, I would believe it" Someone else expressed the opposite view: "It required effort once for the whale to swallow Jonah, and now it requires effort to swallow the story"

Jonah is mentioned in two other places in the Bible. II Kings 14:25 tells us that he was a prophet of Israel, son of Amittai, from the town of Gath, in 8th Cent. BC. Jesus referred to Jonah in Matthew 12:40 - "For just as Jonah was 3 days & 3 nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth;" referring to his death and resurrection. Is Jesus referring to Jonah as an historical person, or is he citing the story of Jonah?

Faithful, devout, intelligent Christians differ on this question. Is the story of Jonah historical fact or a parable? Here's the answer - it doesn't matter. If you believe it's historical, you say, "Well, what does it mean? What's the message? What's the significance?" And if you believe it's a parable, a great story, you still ask the same questions - "What does it mean? What's the message? What's the significance?" So both views arrive at the same place - what does it mean? - what's the message here?

Well, as we'll see it means a lot of things. It means that God never gives up on us. And that God is bigger than our mistakes, our failures and our sometimes bad attitudes.

And Jonah had a bad attitude! Here's how one Bible dictionary described him: "He was a proud, self-centered egotist; willful, pouting, jealous, bloodthirsty; a good patriot and lover of Israel, without proper respect for God or love for his enemies." Other than that he was a great guy!

God called Jonah to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the arch-enemy of the Israelites. Nineveh was situated on the banks of the Tigris River in what's now Iraq. It was a journey due east, less than 600 miles from Israel. But Jonah doesn't want to go there. So instead he goes south to the port city of Joppa. (Today in modern day Israel it's called Jaffa.) Jonah then gets on a boat bound for Tarshish. Do you know where scholars believe Tarshish was? Spain. Now I would chose Spain over

Iraq, too, but God had called him to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was due east. And Spain was due west for about 2000 miles. It was as far west as you could sail in those days.

Jonah was not only running away from his duty. he was trying to run away from God. Of course, he should have remembered a prayer from his prayer book.

Psalm 139: *"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."*

We can't run from God. Lord, knows we try. Sometimes we stop praying. "Maybe if I don't talk to God for a while, God will leave me and my conscience alone. Maybe if I just keep busy these problems, these feelings, these tugs of the heart, these feelings of guilt will just go away. If I just keep busy I can essentially hide from them. But sometimes we get swallowed up by the things we try to run from.

So Jonah gets swallowed up by a large fish. As the choir sang, Jonah was "given some time to think things over." And do you know what he did inside that whale? He prayed. And what a beautiful prayer he prayed. It was filled with phrases from the book of Psalms. This shows the depth of Jonah's spirituality. Of course that's the scary part, that someone who knew his Bible so well, could still try and run from God. And yet, when he needed to pray he had the right words to say because of the Psalms.

*"I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. . . . Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?' . . . yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. . . . But I with the voice of thanksgiving*

*will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"*

Chapter Two ends with this great sentence: *"Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land."*

So in the belly of the whale, in that place of darkness, fear and distress, Jonah stops running from God and instead cries out to his God. We all pray our best prayers when in distress. AA calls it "the gift of desperation." It's the gift of honesty, of coming face to face with who we are, what we've done and where we should be heading.

Chapter Three of the book of Jonah begins with one of the most hopeful passages you'll ever read in the Bible: *"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.'"*

*"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time."* That's our God, the God of second chances. The God who never gives up on us.

On the youth mission trip we learned a new song, "You Never Let Go."  
*Oh, no. You never let go, through the calm & through the storm.*  
*Oh, no. You never let go, in every high and every low.*  
*Oh, no, You never let go. You never let go of me*

God didn't let go of Jonah, even though Jonah had deliberately disobeyed him. Jonah's mistakes were not fatal. God was not finished with him yet. So Jonah goes to Nineveh. It was such a large city that it took 3 days to walk from one end of the city to the other. Jonah delivered God's message that if they didn't get right with God they would be overthrown in 40 days. What followed was a city-wide spiritual revival. From the King on down, everyone repented of their sins and fasted and prayed, begging for God's mercy. Chapter 3 ends this way: *"When God saw what they did, how*

*they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it."*

Jonah was the most successful of all the prophets. Even Christ's messages were not received by everyone. Jonah's words turned an entire city to God. Now here's where it gets really strange - Jonah is outraged at the whole thing. Listen to how Chapter 4 begins: *But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."*

Do you hear what he's saying? He saying, "I knew it! I knew that if I preached here and the people actually turned to you, I knew you'd forgive them. That's why I tried to go to Tarshish instead!" - "I don't want these people to live, and since they are, I don't want to live!"

Do you see why the Bible dictionary called him, a self-centered egotist; pouting, jealous and bloodthirsty? He wants the Ninevites dead. Why? Because they're not Hebrews. They're not the Israelites. They're not Jewish. They're Gentiles.

Jonah, the prophet of Israel, was sent by the God of the Israelites, to non-Jews. There are 17 books of the prophets. And there were even more who lived and ministered to the Israelites. But none of them except Jonah were ever sent to proclaim God's message to Gentiles. Could they be God's people too?

There's a story that's told in Judaism. It's a legend about what happened in heaven following the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. As you recall, the Israelites crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, but the walls of water

came crashing down on the Egyptian army and killed them all. The legend says that the angels who had been sent by God to hold back the waters and then release them upon Pharoah's army - those angels rejoiced and rejoiced when the victory was won. "We got 'em! We got 'em!" They shouted. "We got those Egyptians!" But the Lord silenced the angels and said, "You should be crying, not rejoicing. For the Egyptians are my people, too."

Well, Jonah was finding out that the Ninevites were God's people too. The legend that I told you about is not in the Bible. The only place in the Old Testament that you find this idea that the Gentiles are God's people, too, is the book of Jonah. It's a corrective to the entire Old Testament! Isn't that amazing? That's why it's one of the most important books in all the Bible. And it foreshadows the New Testament, where the Good News of Christ is for all people, Jews & Gentiles!

Well, the Book of Jonah has a bazaar ending. It starts with a whale. It ends with a plant. Jonah is sitting in the hot sun. God quickly sprouts a plant that miraculously grows and grows and provides shade for Jonah. But the next day, God makes sure that the plant dies. And Jonah is ticked off again. And so God says, *"Jonah, you care about that plant. But you didn't plant it. You didn't grow it. You had nothing to do with it. Yet you care about it. How can I not care for the Ninevites? There are 120,000 of them and many animals, too. How can I not care for them, Jonah?"*

That's how the book ends. We never learn Jonah's response. Does he "get it" after all? The writer leaves us hanging, so the ball's in our court.

We're suddenly Jonah?

Can we love our enemies?

Can we love Ninevites? - people who are so very different from us

Can we believe that even the most "godless" people still matter to God?

Can we love those who oppose us? - those we can't even begin to understand?

Can we as a nation loves Muslims? - of course we can!

Can churches love folks who happen to be gay or lesbian? - of course we can!

Who do you have trouble loving?

Perhaps this truth will help: even the Ninevites were children of God.

Think about it.